

Environmental Assessment
E.A.#: OR-056-01-007
Trout Creek O.H.V. Fence and Rehabilitation
Bureau of Land Management
Prineville District
Deschutes Resource Area

I. Purpose and Need

Unauthorized off highway vehicle (OHV) use on public lands along the main access road near Trout Creek Recreation area (T.9S.; R.14E.; Section 5 NW and NE quarters) has increased dramatically in the last five years. The gentle yet rolling topography adjacent to the road allows for easy access off the road to a user created play area for operators of motorcycles, four wheel drive and all terrain vehicles (ATVs). As a result of this use, damage has occurred which includes loss of vegetation, large areas of bare soil and erosion. Approximately three acres of ground is currently involved. The threat of noxious weed invasion to the upland habitat from the road has also greatly increased due to the disturbance. There is a need to close the area to OHV use and rehabilitate it.

II. Proposed Action and Alternatives

No Action: If no action is taken, OHV use would continue in the Trout Creek area. The damage and amount of land subject to impact would increase. Native vegetation still present on the site would give way to bare ground and invasive, non native species. Erosion and soil loss would also continue.

Proposed Action: The proposed action involves building ½ mile of barbed wire fence along the Trout Creek access road (T. 9S., R. 14E.; Section 5 NW and NE quarters). The fence would act as a barrier to prohibit access by off highway vehicles. After the fence was built the project area would be seeded with native grass species to curb erosion.

The fence would be four strand with the top and bottom wires being smooth. Corners and stress panels would be constructed with prefabricated metal panels, that in the event of wildfire, would not burn. Fence posts and metal panels would be green, which would blend in with surrounding vegetation. Prior to construction, large sagebrush would have to be cleared to a width of six feet. Any juniper trees that are located within the fence line would be incorporated into it; eyebolts would be screwed into the trunk and the wire run through them.

Rehabilitation would involve seeding approximately 2 ½ acres of bare ground with native grass species. Prior to planting, the seed would be tested for purity and assurance it contained no noxious weed seeds. Equipment used to accomplish the seeding would include an ATV with

seeder attachment and harrow.

The project area would be signed to indicate closure to off road vehicles on both sides of the main road. There is concern that completion of the project would divert off road use to the other side of the road. In an attempt to avoid such a diversion, the north side of the road would be signed as closed also.

The proposed action is consistent with the Lower Deschutes River Resource Management Plan (RMP), Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), and Record of Decision (ROD), May 1991 (LDRMP). The management plan states that non designated motor vehicle routes shall be closed and rehabilitated (page 227). Preventing unauthorized vehicle access into certain areas would benefit plant growth in previously impacted areas with corresponding improvement in scenic quality, thereby enhancing the recreational experience. The proposal also is consistent with the Two Rivers Resource Management Plan and Record of Decision, 1986. Both of these documents are available for review at the Bureau of Land Management, Prineville District Office.

III. Description of the Affected Environment

The proposed project area is located adjacent to the heavily utilized Trout Creek campground and boat launch on the Lower Deschutes River. The only access road to the river and campground passes through the project area. Recreational use of this section of river and the access road occurs year around. The area in need of closure and rehabilitation is a gently sloped bench located between the access road to the north and a steep slope to the south. The area to the south is fenced with barbed wire however, due to the severity of slope, does not lend itself favorable to OHV use beyond the fence. The proposed project area straddles the Lower Deschutes Wild and Scenic River boundary. So half of the proposed work area is within the Wild and Scenic corridor and the remainder is outside the corridor. Prehistoric cultural sites have been documented in an area adjacent to the proposed project.

Curant and Tub silt loam soil type dominates the proposed project area. This soil type is characterized by north exposures ranging from 8-70 percent slope and well drained silt loam or gravelly clay loam. Runoff potential is medium to rapid and erosion potential is moderate to high. Climax plant community of this soil type would be dominated by perennial bunchgrasses, including Idaho fescue, bluebunch wheatgrass, and Sandberg bluegrass, with only a small percentage of forbs or shrubby species. Currently, the site is dominated by bare ground, patches of annual grasses and widely scattered perennial bunchgrasses. Moderate amounts of juniper and gray rabbitbrush have also invaded the disturbed area. Visual appeal of the project area due to disturbance and lack of vegetation is low. Diffuse knapweed grows along the access road however hasn't yet invaded the proposed project area.

Wildlife species that occur in the area include mule deer, chukar, coyotes, bobcats, badgers, skunks, rabbits ground squirrels, mice, hawks, owls, eagles, ravens, magpies, and several varieties of songbirds.

The proposed project area is within the Delude grazing allotment. Seventy six animal units months (AUMs) are authorized under the current lease, with grazing occurring in winter or early spring. The proposed project area is in a pasture that is predominately private land.

IV. Impacts

Recreation:

No Action:

With the no action alternative unauthorized OHV use would continue to occur as would other legitimate recreational uses of the Trout Creek area. User conflicts could occur from continued off road use. Off road use could increase, and be viewed as an accepted activity on other public land on the Lower Deschutes River, even though it is prohibited in the Lower Deschutes River LRMP.

Proposed Action:

Under the proposed action the limited amount of public users that are using the area for off road use would be impacted. The proposed action would follow direction from the LDRMP which states: "Motor vehicles will be restricted to designated roads, parking areas, and camping areas. Routes not designated will be closed and rehabilitated." (LDRMP page 101, item 1)

Wild and Scenic Rivers:

No Action:

Off road vehicle use adjacent to a wild and scenic river is not consistent with the LDRMP. In the wild and scenic river plan, a wide range of alternatives and uses of the river were assessed. The alternatives included allowing increased recreational use and limiting use also. Off highway vehicle use was addressed in the section common to all alternatives. None of the alternative considered allowing OHV use in the wild and scenic corridor . The Plan states: "Motor vehicles will be restricted to designated roads, parking and camping areas. Routes not designated will be closed and rehabilitated." (page 101, item 1.) Under the no action alternative, unauthorized OHV use would likely continue. As a result of that use the landscape would continue to deteriorate. Wild and scenic values within the river corridor would also be

compromised.

Proposed Action:

If the proposed project were implemented wild and scenic values of the river and surrounding landscape would improve in both appearance and integrity. The presence of the signs and fence may detract from the scenic quality of the area; however increased amounts and more desirable types of vegetation from rehabilitation would be an improvement. Compliance with the LDRMP would be achieved.

Cultural Resources:

No Action:

With no action, continuation of off road use may have some effect on previously undiscovered cultural artifacts. As amounts of bare ground increased and vegetation decreased there is risk of cultural items being churned up to the soil surface then collected by the public. Also, there is a prehistoric cultural site adjacent to the project area. If the no action alternative were chosen, risk of damage to this site would increase as the area receiving OHV use grew larger.

Proposed Action:

The project area and adjacent prehistoric cultural site were looked at by the Deschutes Resource Area Archaeologist in January 2001. No cultural resources were found within the project area. As a result of the site visit and because of the small size of the project area, a no effect determination for cultural resources was issued due to the small size of the project area (Project Tracking Form for Non-Exempt Undertakings, Cultural Project Number 01-05-06, Prineville BLM). If cultural resources were discovered during implementation of the project, the action would be modified to protect those resources. Cultural resource monitoring of the project area and adjacent prehistoric site would after the project was completed.

Visual:

No Action:

With the no action alternative, OHV use along Trout Creek access road would likely continue to occur. As a result of that use the visual appeal of the area would continue to deteriorate, through increasing amounts of bare ground or further invasion of introduced plant species and noxious weeds.

Proposed Action:

With the proposed action there would be visual impacts from the construction of the fence, since the fence line would closely follow the access road. To some degree the visual impacts of the fence would be reduced by the existing juniper and sagebrush already on the site. This would be accomplished by incorporating the juniper trees into the fence line where possible. By using eyebolts to thread the wire through instead of scabbing and wrapping the wire around the tree trunks the appearance of the fence would be less intrusive. The green fence posts and fence panels would blend in with the rest of the landscape. "One example of a special design feature is the use of a specific fence post color to blend with the surrounding environment, mitigating some visual impact of the fence." (Two Rivers Resource Management Plan, Record of Decision and Rangeland Program Summary, page 40, paragraph 1). The current landscape has very little visual appeal due to the large areas of bare ground and degraded vegetation.

Over the long term, with the reestablishment of native vegetation and elimination of bare ground through seeding, visual appeal would improve. The area would blend better into the rest of the landscape than at present and no longer be a negative focal point.

Soil, Vegetation and Invasive, Non native Species

No Action:

With no action, the amount and extent of damage would increase within the area of unauthorized OHV use. Bare ground would replace the few native species remaining. The area would be vulnerable to invasion of noxious weeds or other non native species. In time, the core use area would not even be able to support those species. The moderate to high erosion index of this soil type coupled with slope and large amounts of bare ground would result in the probability of soil loss. Also, the probability of invasion by noxious weeds would increase with the bare ground acting as a seed bed. In general, the area would lack species diversity and integrity. Even if the public were to stop the OHV use of their own accord the odds of recovery without seeding are slim, as there is not enough remaining native vegetation to act as a seed source.

Proposed Action:

The proposed action would eliminate further damage to soils and remaining vegetation and in time, result in recovery of more normal ecological processes. A small amount of disturbance would occur during the fence construction; however, it could be considered minuscule compared to the amount of disturbance already on site from OHV use. In order to build the fence, sagebrush would be cut along a portion of the fenceline. Trees that are located along the

fence would be either cut down or incorporated into the fence. Instead of wrapping the wire around the trunks of the trees, the wire would be threaded through eye bolts screwed into the tree trunks. Fence posts and brace panels would be green in color. Use of an ATV to pull the wire for the fence and seed the proposed areas would be the only motorized traffic off of the main road. Use of a harrow pulled behind the seeder would level areas where soil is mounded and cover the seed.

Seeding the bare ground with native species would reduce the threat of invasion by noxious weeds or less desirable species. Establishment of perennial grasses would decrease amounts of species such as cheatgrass and medusahead rye, which are very flammable, and would diminish the threat of catastrophic fire. Species proposed for seeding are: bluebunch wheatgrass (*Agropyron spicatum*), bottlebrush squirreltail (*Elymus elymoides*), thickspike wheatgrass (*Agropyron dasystachyum*), sand dropseed (*Sporobolus cryptandrus*), and Sherman big bluegrass (*Poa ampla*). The seeds of squirreltail bottle brush and sand dropseed each have specialized characteristics that allow them to better establish and compete with any annual grasses that may also germinate. The large bare areas where the soil is very stirred up and loose on the ground surface create an ideal seed bed for all of the seeded species. With the establishment of the deeper rooted perennial grasses, threat of soil loss or movement from wind or water would also decrease.

The end result of the project would be a more natural landscape with greater species diversity and ecological stability.

Wildlife:

No Action

The no action alternative would result in further loss of wildlife habitat through decreased forage and upland habitat. Continuation of OHV use would increase the probability of wildlife being disturbed by OHV presence or noise.

Proposed action:

Construction of the fence would create an obstacle which big game would have to negotiate. "All fences are designed to mitigate wildlife movement problems." (Two Rivers Resource Management Plan, Record of Decision and Rangeland Program Summary, page 40 paragraph 2). The impacts of the fence would be partially mitigated by fence specifications designed to facilitate their passage including the use of smooth wire on the top and bottom, and wire heights of 38" for the top and 18 inches for the bottom. The wire heights would allow easier passage and use of smooth wire would reduce risk of injury or wildlife getting caught. Wildlife would benefit in the long run from improved quality and quantity of vegetation in the project area. An increase in species richness would be expected with the improved habitat diversity and

condition.

Special Status Wildlife:

No action:

No additional impact.

Proposed Action:

The only special status wildlife species documented in this area is the Bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), which is a winter seasonal migrant. The proposed action would have no impact on the Bald eagle.

There would be no effect to listed fish or their habitat.

Special Status Plants:

No Action:

No impact to special status plant species would be expected to occur with this alternative due to the current heavy disturbance and lack of habitat present on site.

Proposed Action:

The proposed action would have no impact on special status plants due to lack of habitat for those species and the existing heavy disturbance at the project site. The Trout Creek recreation site and adjacent lands have been informally inventoried and no special status plants were found. The project would result in minimal short-term disturbance and long term restoration of the site (Prineville BLM Special Status Plant Survey Waiver, Report No.: 01019).

Livestock Grazing:

No action:

If no action were taken and OHV use were to continue, as with wildlife some available forage for cattle would be lost. As the damaged area grew the loss would increase.

Proposed Action:

To implement the proposed action, construction of the fence would exclude approximately eight acres of public land under the grazing lease. With the current condition of the damaged area, very little forage is available within the area that would be excluded, so the loss would be minimal.

Mitigation Measures and Residual Impacts:

As discussed above, the proposed action would impact wildlife, visuals, and grazing. The impacts to wildlife resulting from construction of the fence would be partially mitigated by using smooth wire on the top and bottom and specialized wire heights. Both actions would make easier passage over or through the fence.

The visual impacts caused by the fence would also be partially mitigated through construction type. Materials that blend in with the landscape would be incorporated as much as possible. Trees that were incorporated into the fence would act as a partial screen to hide the fence, since as few limbs as possible would be cut off the tree. The eyebolts would also be much less visually obtrusive than scabbing. After the revegetation portion of the of the project was completed, visual quality of the area would also improve. However, the fence would remain there to control use in the future, so some impacts to visual quality from Trout Creek road would remain.

Since the fence would exclude use by cattle in a small area. Standard practice with exclusion fences is that they are maintained by the BLM, thus not adding further maintenance responsibilities to the leaseholder.

Cumulative Impacts:

Fencing the proposed project area to prohibit off road vehicle use and seeding with native species would result in a much more natural setting in the future. Soil would be stabilized and risk of erosion reduced or eliminated. Habitat for wildlife and native plant species would improve dramatically. With time, the area would be much more aesthetically pleasing for public users than at present.

No Impact Items:

The following critical elements were considered, but will not be addressed because they would either not be affected or do not exist in the project area:

1. Agricultural lands (prime or unique)
2. Air quality
3. Areas of Critical Concern
4. Environmental Justice
5. Floodplains
6. Native American Religious Concerns
7. Paleontology
8. Timber
9. Wastes (hazardous or solid)
10. Water quality
11. Wetlands/Riparian Areas
12. Wilderness (including Wilderness Study Areas)

VI. Consultation and Coordination

Preparers (BLM):

Helen McGranahan - Natural Resource Technician

John Hanf - Range and Wildlife

Jim Eisner - Fisheries

Ron Halvorson - Special Status Plants

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Michelle McSwain - Hydrology

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NEPA requirements met:

/s/Marci Todd
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Date



